

VZCZCXRO3719
RR RUEHIK
DE RUEHSI #2179 3451418
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 111418Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2594
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS TBILISI 002179

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: TOLERANCE REIGNS AT THE OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE

Unclassified

¶1. Summary: For the first time, the Public Defender's Office (PDO) commemorated an "International Day of Tolerance," honoring several Georgian NGOs and individuals for their contribution toward advancing tolerance in Georgian society. This event brought together representatives from all the major religious denominations and all the major ethnic minority groups in Georgia. The new Public Defender Giorgi Tugushi made it clear that tolerance of minority and religious issues is one of his top priorities. In this environment where the promotion of tolerance is often perceived as somehow being anti-Georgian or anti-Georgian Orthodox Church, Tugushi and those he recognized deserve recognition for their efforts. End Summary.

THE GOOD

¶2. Among the achievements Public Defender Tugushi singled out during the DATE ceremony was the successful work of the Council of Religious and Ethnic Minorities operating under the auspices of the Public Defender's Office. Tugushi noted specific achievements such as: the registration of religious organizations in accordance with the Civil Code of Georgia; the introduction of alternative military service taking into account the principles of various faiths; access of respective priests to prison inmates of various faiths; and the basic revocation of Orthodox "indoctrination" at schools.

THE BAD

¶3. Addressing current shortcomings, Tugushi stressed the general need to improve tolerance in Georgian society, as well as more specific problems such as: the controversy over the formal status of various religious denominations; the unresolved ownership issues of several Armenian and Catholic churches; the status of mosques in Samtkhe-Javakheti traditionally owned by Georgian Meskhetian Muslims; the continued existence of discrimination against religious minority students at schools; the continued practice of Orthodox proselytizing on the part of school teachers; insufficient media attention to ethnic and religious diversity in Georgia; and still common aggressive actions taken by certain Orthodox extremist organizations. With regard to these problems, Tugushi recommended a more focused enhancement of the work of law-enforcement bodies, local municipalities, the Ministry of Education, and the media with a view towards tolerance.

THE TOLERANT

¶4. A festive reception concluded the event and proved to be a good illustration of tolerance "in action." Religious leaders wearing different robes, civil society leaders of different ethnicities, and mainstream Georgians of different political views raised glasses of champagne to each other. As one of the civil society representatives noted, there are different approaches to solving the issues surrounding tolerance in Georgia, but this event succeeded in raising key issues raised, and acknowledging worthy efforts to promote tolerance. The importance of the event was further enhanced by broad media coverage that highlighted, within the bigger context of International Day, the theme of tolerance which is not frequently addressed by the Georgian media.

ADVOCATES OF TOLERANCE

15. Special certificates of recognition to "Advocates of Tolerance" were presented to: the Caucasus House (Naira Gelashvili); Caucasus Institute of Democratic Development (Gia Nodia); Liberty Institute (Levan Ramishvili); Center for Conflict Resolution and Negotiation (Giorgi Khutsishvili); Georgian writer of Armenian ethnicity Givi Shakhnazari; philologists Zurab Kiknadze and Nugzar Papuashvili; and Georgia Orthodox priest Zaza Tevzadze. (Embassy note: the Ambassador will further recognize these honorees by hosting a lunch for the Ombudsman and the group the week of December 15. End note.)

The PDO announced that the honorary title of "Advocate of Tolerance" would now be awarded annually. It was noted by the PDO that this year there were no media outlets nominated for the award, but he hoped that "next year media representatives would also be recognized for their efforts".

BASS